



## NOT JUST ANY GARDEN

### A RECENT RENOVATION DRAWS PRAISE AND CONTROVERSY TO THE WHITE HOUSE ROSE GARDEN.

BY KIM O'CONNELL

**ABOVE**  
The newly renovated White House Rose Garden included the removal of the signature crabapple trees, imposing a greater sense of formality and deference to the architecture.

In a time of national turmoil, a First Lady sought to bring beauty and order back to the neglected Rose Garden outside the executive West Wing of the White House. The year was 1962, and that First Lady, of course, was Jacqueline Kennedy. Nearly 60 years later, as another First Lady has overseen a renovation of the space, the Rose Garden has become a potent symbol of the nation's deep fault lines and raised questions about whether landscape architecture can or should be separated from politics.

For the landscape architects who worked with First Lady Melania Trump and her office to develop the design scheme—Washington, D.C.-based Oehme, van Sweden (OvS) and the New York-based landscape

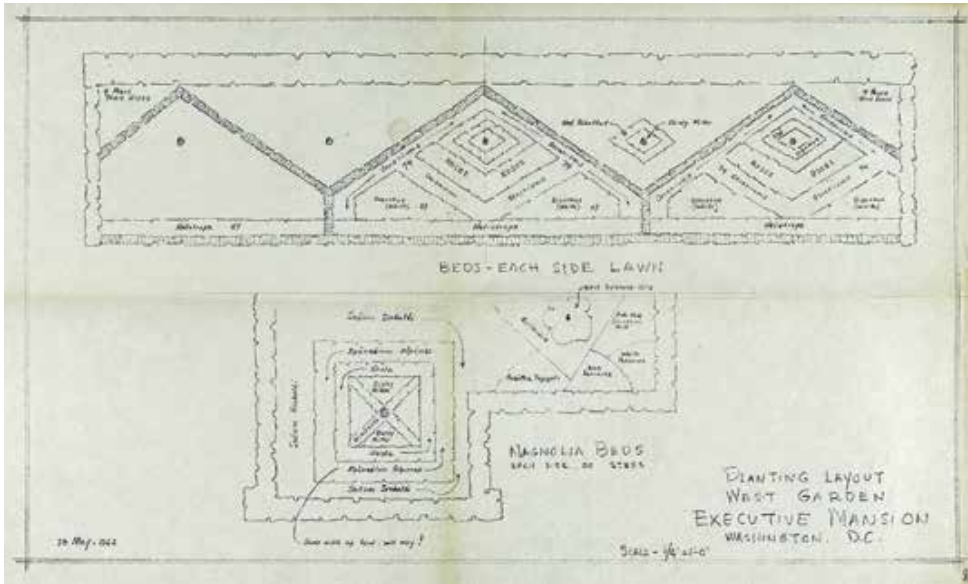
historically significant public landscape. Since Kennedy's time, trees had grown overlarge, views were obstructed, paving schemes were not unified, and many plants were blighted or ailing, says Eric Groft, FASLA, a principal at OvS.

“Quite frankly, most of the White House grounds were not up to 20th-century standards, let alone 21st-century standards,” he says. “What this garden had evolved into was an annual display garden. They had really lost the spirit of the original design. That's why we took the project on, because it needed to be done. And we're quite proud of it.”

The project has grabbed attention well outside the profession, with stories in *Town & Country*, *USA*

*Today*, and other publications. While the majority of comments were positive, for others, the renovation fell somewhere on the spectrum of historically insensitive, poorly timed (amid ongoing racial unrest and the global pandemic), and ethically questionable. The last in particular was in response to Donald Trump's policies and positions on climate change, immigration, racial equality, and other issues that are directly at odds with the goals of the profession.

“I just can't imagine justification for this project,” says Billy Fleming, ASLA, a director of the McHarg Center at the University of Pennsylvania's Weitzman School of Design and a vocal online critic of the effort. “[T]he only form of justification I could even imagine offering—and one that I've seen some folks try—is that OvS and others got involved to save the Rose Garden from disaster, which, in addition to being wildly hubristic about one's own design



talents, still requires you to justify working for a racist autocrat who has certainly used the power of the presidency to attack BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color] and other vulnerable people around the country. It's likely that includes at least a few OvS team employees and absolutely includes people outside the firm in the broader landscape architecture profession."

On Twitter, the landscape architect Pierre Bélanger (@lowlowtide) called on ASLA to denounce the project via several tweets and an open letter that he read over video, in which he called out the "rendering of design services that served to...uphold a dangerous, dictatorial regime and violent, corrupt autocracy," and argues the project violates ASLA's Code of Professional Ethics.

In response, Groft says that working on the Rose Garden was an apolitical decision for the firm that transcends Trump or any one administration. He notes that the client was not Presi-

dent Trump or even the First Lady, but the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, particularly the office of the Chief Usher. Aside from the First Lady's preference for a creamy palette of rose colors, there was little input from "upstairs." The committee—and particularly the newly formed Committee for the Preservation of the White House Grounds, which includes advisers from several landscape-oriented institutions, including the U.S. National Arboretum, Dumbarton Oaks, and the U.S. Botanic Garden—is designed to be an explicit safeguard against the potentially shortsighted or self-serving decisions of a single president, First Lady, or administration.

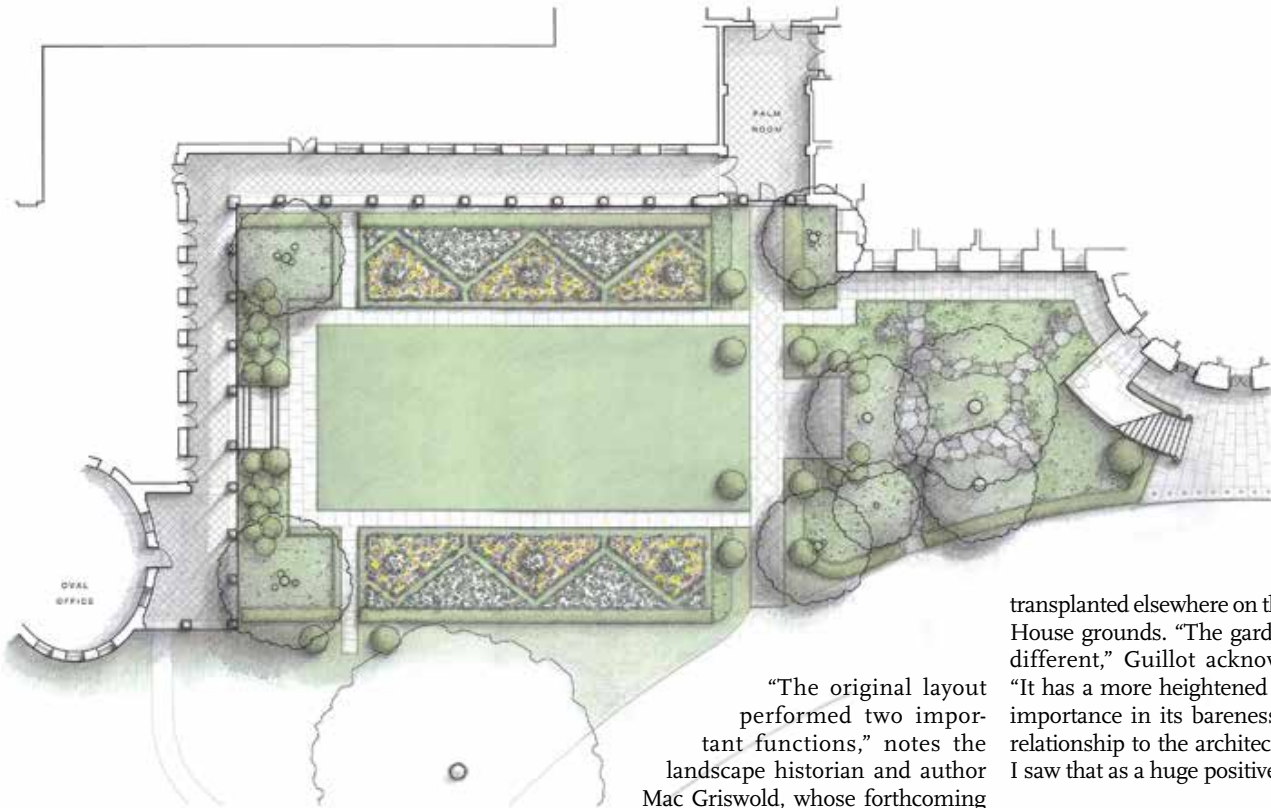
"It was a historic project at a historic house," Groft says. "We did this with the idea that it was the People's Garden, regardless of the current occupant of the White House. Our mantra was 1962." That year, Kennedy had engaged a friend, the garden designer Rachel "Bunny" Mellon, to overhaul the Rose Garden. Mellon then en-

gaged the landscape architect Perry Wheeler, with whom she developed a formal plan for a central lawn lined by two parterre planting beds, in which boxwoods framed angular sections of roses. A quintet of flowering crabapple trees on each side provided verticality and an overstory.

The designers have restored the elegant structure of the Mellon design, but with a planting scheme that has opened up views both to and from the West Wing terrace, connected the space to the South Lawn, unified the paving (including a new diamond-patterned walkway on the garden's east end that was Guillot's conception), and upgraded its lighting and technological capabilities for public events. *Editor's note: At press time, the full consequences of a recent ceremony that was the likely origin of a coronavirus infection nexus were not known.*

The most obvious change has been the removal of the 10 crabapple trees, a decision that OvS says resulted from concerns about the trees' effect on the roses beneath them and on garden views, but one that arguably received the most criticism and concern from observers on social media (albeit with many erroneously calling them cherry trees). *Audubon* magazine also published a piece wondering why

**ABOVE**  
A circa 1962 planting scheme by the garden designer Bunny Mellon included space for roses, geraniums, and *Dianthus* varieties.



the renovation did not include more bird-friendly native plants. Widely known for its use of natives, OvS had included an area with native plantings in its earliest proposals for the Rose Garden, but the scheme was largely discarded in the final analysis.

The whole narrative of the White House grounds, says Charles Birnbaum, FASLA, the president and CEO of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, is about both change and continuity. At the same time, he laments the loss of the trees, and the precedent their removal sets regarding adherence to the National Park Service's standards for cultural landscape preservation. "With the absence of these trees, it changes from being something closely aligned with Bunny Mellon," Birnbaum says. "Now it's dominated by the Portico and the Garden Room. That's a very conscious decision. You can see why people have responded emotionally."

"The original layout performed two important functions," notes the landscape historian and author Mac Griswold, whose forthcoming biography, *The Conjuror: The Life and Magic of Bunny Mellon*, is due in early 2022. "It provided a new venue for a president who was the first to recognize that TV was going to be the stage, and second, [Mellon] realized that the tall, white, wedding cake of a house would dwarf any garden she would provide." So Mellon designed the garden with three levels to break up the height of the house, Griswold says—towering magnolias in the corners, then the midrange rows of crabapples, and the ground-level parterres. Without the crabapples, Griswold believes, that important step down to the parterre is missing.

At some point, a new shrub varietal called the White House Rose will be planted where the crabapples once stood. It will grow up to five feet high, returning some dimensionality to the space. And where possible, Guillot says, the crabapples may be

transplanted elsewhere on the White House grounds. "The garden looks different," Guillot acknowledges. "It has a more heightened sense of importance in its bareness and its relationship to the architecture, but I saw that as a huge positive."

As part of the project, OvS produced *The White House Rose Garden Landscape Report*, an exhaustive, nearly 250-page compilation of historical information, drawings, photographs, and plans that is publicly available at <http://bit.ly/OVSRose>. "We had hundreds of people all working together to create this garden for the American people," Groft says. "There is a message there that people should feel good about. There's nothing like a garden to heal wounds and bring people together."

Clearly, this isn't just any garden, but another public intersection where landscape architects are grappling with their roles as placemakers, testers, and citizens. Birnbaum says, "Politics affects every landscape in Washington." ●

KIM O'CONNELL WRITES ABOUT NATURE, SCIENCE, AND SUSTAINABILITY FROM ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA.

**ABOVE**  
The consensus master plan shows the unified paving plan and the placement of a new shrub rose varietal that will provide some dimensionality to the parterres.